

BOOK REVIEW

Famine Relief and the Writing of African History

In This Land of Plenty: Mickey Leland and Africa in American Politics

By Ben Talton. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020.
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It is not every day that a historian witnesses, within their own lifetime, the resumption of events that the author might have thought — or wished — were confined to the archives. Yet in the past year this has come to pass for historians of Ethiopia, a country where the present has begun to resemble the past in shocking ways. The civil wars of the 1980s have returned, with basically the same protagonists acting out a script that seems already to have been performed: the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) battle the central government; agricultural land is destroyed by aerial bombardment; civilians are recruited into military units meant to preserve the integrity of the nation-state. Government spokespersons mouth rhetoric that could have been uttered four decades ago, while humanitarian personnel are named risks to national security.¹

Given all this, any look back at famine relief efforts from the era of Ethiopia's 1980s Civil War would be complicated, if not treacherous. Yet, this is precisely what Benjamin Talton does in his book *In This Land of Plenty: Mickey Leland and Africa in American Politics*. And while the book was conceived, written, and published long before the current civil war broke out in November 2020, it has now arrived into just the right moment. Talton's book explores the social and political tensions of African American solidarity towards Africa in the 1980s. By considering what sense Black American internationalists do and do not make out of African affairs, the study helps clarify what is both new and old in the current conflict. The repetition of historical events also signals that history writing is risky and can reopen wounds that have not yet healed. Inadvertently, history can become part of the battlefield over meaning-making in a time of conflict.

Mickey Leland was an African American lawmaker whose tenure in the US House of Representatives lasted from 1978 until his untimely death in Ethiopia in 1989. His path to Congress began with student activism in Houston's Black communities in the 1960s and 1970s, where his political convictions were forged in the fire of Black radicalism. Leland then spent six years in the Texas state legislature focusing on health care and related social justice issues. After moving to Congress, Leland chaired the Congressional Black Caucus, where he is best remembered

¹See, for example: UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance, *Ethiopia - Northern Ethiopia Humanitarian Situation Report*, Geneva, 11 Nov. 2021; UNOHCHR, *Report of the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC)/Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) Joint Investigation into Alleged Violations of International Human Rights, Humanitarian and Refugee Law Committed by all Parties to the Conflict in the Tigray Region of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia*, Geneva, 3 Nov. 2021.



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for founding the House Select Committee on Hunger. Throughout his tenure as congressman Leland raised awareness on the issue of famine in both Ethiopia and Sudan. He also led a number of bipartisan delegations to the Horn of Africa to study the famines firsthand, eventually steering the passage of the 1985 Africa Famine and Relief Act.

In This Land of Plenty argues that Leland represented the best of the Black radical tradition, even as that tradition had begun to dissipate when Leland was at the pinnacle of his career. For Talton, Leland's life work proves that Black Power did not disappear in the 1980s; rather, it was re-articulated through discrete political causes and legislative activism. The congressman thus exemplifies what became possible for Black activists shaped by the civil rights movement but who lived in the afterlife of Black radicalism. Talton's proposition is compelling. Activists like Leland understood that control of schools, libraries, health centers, and other community organizations charted a path to self-determination for all Black people. Electoral politics was less about social integration and more about community control over the resources that might be directed at them. If you wished to address economic and social problems in your community, it followed, you needed to hold political power. Leland's work on famine in Africa was an extension of this principle in so much as he understood Africa to be part of a global Black community affected by the same issues as his electoral constituency back home in Texas.

Leland's career is only part of Talton's study. The book attempts to understand him as an archetypal character who embodied what was possible for Black activists in the post-civil rights era. The book is organized chronologically around important moments in Leland's career and then extends beyond him. We begin with Leland's student activism in his home town of Houston and the book ends with him leading his final delegation to the refugee camps on the border between Ethiopia and South Sudan. The middle sections of the book (Chapter Two through Chapter Six) are largely concerned with Leland's legislative efforts in the US Congress. We encounter an array of anecdotes about Leland's various congressional achievements in tandem with other Black politicians, including Charles Diggs, Andrew Young, and Ralph Bunche. Talton provides information about the historical context that shaped Leland's activism with the intention of providing a more vivid portrayal of his main character, although what was distinctive about Leland often drowns in the details.

Talton is most successful at showing how congresspeople like Leland worked on African affairs, especially on famine in the Horn and efforts to end apartheid in South Africa. It was often easier for Black Americans to identify with the latter than the former. Black congressmen had a harder time grasping the complexity of post-independence Africa, especially the issue of famine and civil war. And yet, despite this pivotal insight, Talton suggests that African Americans were the natural constituency through which African issues should be raised and discussed within American politics. Empirically speaking, Talton's book does show that Leland had an enormous influence on US policy towards Africa, but what Talton is ultimately concerned with is the fact that African American lawmakers no longer engage African issues as a block.

Part of the legacy of African American solidarity with Africa includes a sustained engagement with what Talton and other scholars (notably Keisha Blain) have named Black internationalism. For Leland, the praxis of Black internationalism included time spent in Tanzania, which taught him that Black people could be in charge of their own destiny. As Leland saw it, anticolonial movements in Africa set an example for what the diaspora might do outside of Africa. Similarly, Talton considers how Leland saw Ethiopia as a symbol of African resistance to imperialism, a longstanding facet of Black internationalist imagination. Discussing Ethiopian resistance to Haile Selassie's rule, Talton suggests that Leland would not have understood why local social movements disparaged the emperor, especially since Haile Selassie remained a pan-Africanist icon outside of Ethiopia. For someone like Leland, any attack on African sovereignty and the heroes of pan-Africanism would be understood as an attack on African self-determination. What this near automatic affiliation with African heads of state demonstrates is that it was possible for Leland to easily conflate the Black Power principle of community control over resources with defending African heads of states.

This approach to African sovereignty seems to have influenced Leland's approach to famine relief even when dealing with Mengistu Haile Mariam, who led the post-revolutionary Ethiopian regime from 1974 to 1991. To that end, Leland insisted that the Ethiopian famine of the 1980s was a humanitarian issue and not a human rights issue. That much is clear; it is less clear where Talton himself stands on the issue of African sovereignty and Black internationalism. Given that Talton wishes to vouch for Leland as a role model for our present, this is not an idle question. What does it mean to align Black politics and humanitarianism today? In the 1980s, for example, successful famine relief was also undertaken by the various rebel fronts operating in Ethiopia. Yet both Leland and Talton focus almost all of their attention on famine relief that passed through the Ethiopian state. How does a notion of African sovereignty vested in the executive arm of the government limit African American engagements with the continent in the post-radical era?

The problem of African sovereignty in Talton's book is represented here through the frequent appearance of Dawit Wolde Giorgis, who, amongst many things, was head of the Ethiopian Relief and Rehabilitation Commission from 1983 to 1985 and, therefore, responsible for organizing famine relief during that period. Dawit was Leland's most important contact in the Ethiopian government and throughout the book Talton cites Dawit as a way to explain Leland's position that non-political humanitarian aid was the best way for the US to engage with relief efforts in Ethiopia. It is particularly telling that Dawit insisted that the inflammatory rhetoric of organizations like USAID towards the Ethiopian government 'would polarize relationships and hinder relief efforts' (103). Dawit's contention was that any mention of human rights abuses should be tempered for the sake of saving starving children. This quote could have been taken from a newspaper article or social media post written about Ethiopia in 2021.² Indeed, Dawit continues to write and publish about the civil war currently unfolding in Ethiopia. He continues to admonish US audiences to keep their 'Hands off Ethiopia', demanding that sovereignty trump all other concerns.³

What are we to make of the fact that a ghost from Talton's book has literally walked off the page and reasserted himself in contemporary affairs in such a partisan fashion? At the very least, if, in the name of pursuing justice so many have been willing to instrumentalize life and death, it should tell us that there are no straightforward lessons to be learnt from Leland, or Black internationalism. There can only be questions. *In the Land of Plenty*, however, is not motivated by questions. It opts for a straightforward telling of events as they happened. The reappearance of the ghosts of the 1980s should caution historians to take more self-reflexive positions vis-à-vis their subject material. It is clear that no amount of factual evidence will help us understand Dawit's words, instead we need a better accounting of the moral and political convictions that not only drive political actors such as Dawit Wolde Giorgis but also Mickey Leland. We need to understand the relationship between words and deeds, and the way their meaning is transformed relationally over time. Such an understanding cannot come from tracing the linear unfolding of a career in politics. It requires appreciating the ways that Mickey Leland's life must have been lived dialogically, as a conversation between personal thought, collective action, social praxis, and contradiction. The writing of the complex history of famine relief would also have to delineate the relationship between individual and collective thought, action, praxis, and contradiction.

To acknowledge this would be take a different approach to Leland's story. First off, instead of emphasizing his formal political activity, we might want to better understand how community engagement and electoral politics worked together to build individual conviction that leads to a political stance. If Mickey Leland exemplified the Black radical tradition, then this raises the question of

²The current Ethiopian conflict can be characterized by the use of intensely bellicose speech that seeks to denounce perceived US support for the TPLF. A contentious discussion point is the humanitarian blockade in Northern Ethiopia. For a report on the bellicose nature of discourse see: S. Allison, S. Gebré and C. Wilmot, 'Leaked documents reveal how Facebook failed to contain hate speech in Ethiopia', *The Continent*, 64, 13 Nov. 2021.

³See, for example, D.W. Giorgis, 'Lobbying and the US Foreign Policy', in *Borkena*, 27 Sep. 2021, <https://borkena.com/2021/09/27/lobbying-and-the-us-foreign-policy-dawit-wolde-giorgis/>

the connection between the personal and the political; how does an individual negotiate the tensions between a politics they might have inherited and broader historical processes? Talton's book is somewhat reticent about the extent to which Leland's Texas constituency understood his Africa work; we don't know what his career meant for the people he represented and cared about in Texas — or, for that matter, in Ethiopia. Does Black internationalism have anything to say about ordinary Black people, except as subjects to be saved? The chronological style of the book serves a pedagogical purpose: it provides a clear, step-by-step guide on how to rebuild African American solidarity with African peoples. Yet for Leland's life to serve as an example, we need to understand what his legacy meant for the people whose lives he aimed to change, who are almost entirely absent from the story. As a result, it's hard to know how to judge Dawit's words or, invariably, the words of his opponents. Through what criteria can we make sense of arguments abstracted from the people most affected by the words and deeds of Dawit or Mickey Leland? If there is a pedagogical purpose to history writing, it should attempt to answer this question. That work remains to be done.

Growing up in Addis Ababa what I most remember about Mickey Leland was that there was a street named after him. It was not until I read Ben Talton's book that I began to understand the importance of Leland's anti-poverty activism and the way he saw hunger as a key issue that connected African American populations with African concerns. Talton's book ought to reignite interest in a person whose convictions had faded into the background story of the Ethiopian famine. But Talton's book unintentionally teaches us something about the ways Black internationalism can silence history's complexity, even as African Americans stand in solidarity with those on the continent. The conundrum is best expressed by the Senegalese author Boubacar Boris Diop, who in the Afterword to his novel, *Murambi: The Book of Bones*, writes:

If it is still so easy for us to forget Césaire's warning ('A screaming man is not a bear'), this is because of our propensity to see in African tragedies not singular events but instead the successive and repeated sequences, *ad infinitum*, of a more widespread and ongoing cataclysm. . . . Each of these tragedies, far from existing in their own right . . . are simply perceived as one of the many aftershocks of the same earthquake that has shaken the African continent without interruption since the dawn of time.⁴

It seems to me that neither Leland nor Talton manage to elude this familiar epistemological trap. Among the many lessons *In This Land of Plenty* should have offered students of Black internationalism is how to grapple with this lesson in particular. What we end up with instead is a disembodied reading of historical events.

⁴B. B. Diop, *Murambi: The Book of Bones* (Bloomington, IN, 2016).